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Old-fashioned Herbs -- How to Grow and Use Them

Part III

A dialogue between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Mr. W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, October 15, 1936.

MR. SALISBURY: Now, picking up the story of home-grown herbs where we had to ask Miss Van Deman and Mr. Beattie to lay it down yesterday. Mr. Beattie, I think you'd told us how to make a large and flourishing mint bed. And, Ruth, you gave us some of the uses.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, some. Everybody's free to put his mint to his own devices. You know the English even cook their green peas with a few sprigs of mint. And I saw a whole windowful of crystallized mint leaves in a confectioner's window in New York recently. A pleasant variation from the usual after-dinner mints. Well, Mr. Beattie, since we can't tell all we know, shall we omit parsley -- how to grow it, and how to season and garnish with it.

MR. BEATTIE: And how not to over garnish with it, and make a man push it off the platter onto the tablecloth when he's carving the Thanksgiving turkey.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Well said, sir. Too much parsley is almost worse than no parsley at all. And that's also the way I fell about sage as a seasoning. Is sage very easy to grow? Is that why so many people use so much of it?

MR. BEATTIE: Yes, sage is easy to grow, and when it's once established the plants will last for years. It requires a fairly rich soil and it can be started either from seed or from cuttings. The tender, growing tips and leaves should be sheared about twice during a season, and these clippings tied in small bundles and dried thoroughly but quickly. Then they should be stored in airtight containers to preserve their flavor. Tin cans or glass jars with tight covers are best, but tight paper bags with the ends sealed will do. There are a few general points about drying and storing herbs that might be useful.

MISS VAN DEMAN: First, let's finish up our herb alphabet, with savory-summer and winter savory, thyme, and tarragon. I put the thyme ahead of the tarragon because it's so often mixed with the savories and sage in poultry seasoning.

MR. BEATTIE: And they're all grown in much the same way. Summer savory is an annual, raised from seeds sown in the spring. Winter savory is a perennial, and so is thyme. (By the way--this is thyme, spelled t - h - y - m - e, we're talking about.) It will grow in almost any kind of soil, even in the crannies of a sunny wall. I have a row of thyme plants in my garden and I keep them cultivated just like any others. In the fall I put a mulch of straw or leaves around, but not over them, to protect them during the winter. And like sweet marjoram and basil and some of the other herbs we've talked about, you can pot thyme plants and keep them in the house during the winter.

MISS VAN DEMAN: We'll have a whole herb garden on the kitchen window sill if we keep on. Now, I wish you'd give us the secret of growing tarragon. Of all the herbs I think tarragon has about the most delightful flavor. Vinegar flavored with tarragon and used in salad dressing, or some of the green tarragon leaves chopped and stirred in with the other vegetables in a salad lifts it entirely out of the ordinary. Then there's a famous French sauce, delicious with fish, that depends entirely on fresh tarragon for the seasoning.

I've never tried to grow tarragon myself, but my friends who have say it's very temperamental and difficult to make thrive.

MR. BEATTIE: Maybe they had the soil too rich. Tarragon is a rather small shrubby perennial about two feet high, native to the southern parts of Russia and the Caucasus -- regions where the soil is dry and poor, but rather warm. In most parts of this country tarragon plants need a little protection in winter, and they'll die out if the soil is moist and heavy. It rarely produces seed, at least seed that will grow. So the usual method of propagating it is by dividing the roots in the early spring. It is the green tender shoots that possess the delicate aromatic flavor you like so much, Miss Van Deman. Whenever the flowerstems appear on tarragon they should be cut out, so as to let the vigor of the plant go into producing leaves.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Now, Mr. Beattie, to go back to your points about gathering and drying herbs?

MR. BEATTIE: Well, the first one is to gather the herbs at the right stage. In the case of herbs grown for their seeds, this is just before the seeds begin to shatter. With herbs grown for their leaves, they should be gathered while the tips of the stems and the leaves are green and tender. Certain ones like thyme should be gathered when they are in full bloom. In all cases they should be dried in the shade and with plenty of ventilation.

MISS VAN DEMAN: How about some heat while the herbs are drying?

MR. BEATTIE: Moderate heat is all right, but you must have ventilation also. You can make a good frame for drying herbs by nailing four pieces of lath together and then stretching cheesecloth over it. And if you tie string to the four corners of the drying frame, you can easily hang it to a hook in the ceiling over the kitchen stove. Or if you have several kinds of herbs to dry at once, you can make a number of these frames and hang one above the other. A fruit drier is also excellent for drying herbs over the kitchen stove.

Where herbs are simply tied in bunches and hung up to dry in a room or a shed, it is a good plan to wrap a piece of paper around each bundle and leave the ends open to permit the passage of air. The paper shuts out the light and your herbs will dry with a brighter color than if fully exposed to the light. Under no circumstances should herbs be dried in the sunshine, they'll lose color and flavor.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, as we remarked before, it's the volatile, aromatic oil in herbs that give them their fragrance and flavor. And unless you use them fresh or dry and store them so as to retain that oil, you might just as well have so much dried grass.

MR. SALISBURY: Thank you, Miss Van Deman and Mr. Beattie, for this very interesting series of talks on garden herbs and ways to use them in flavoring foods. Many of you, I know, will want some follow-up material.